VIDEO GAME MODDING AND MONEY

From Precarious Playbor to Reimbursed Labor of Love?

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ABSTRACT

As hobbyist game developers, 'modders' transform video games by altering and extending their content. Even though the labor they carry out often contributes to the success of games, they usually do not get a monetary share of the value they enhance. Building upon this, modding has been discussed as a form of 'precarious labor' in the past, with authors drawing attention to the power imbalance between modders and official developers. At the same time, most efforts of reimbursing modders and 'paid modding' have caused controversy within the modding community, and modding is still seen as a voluntary, free-of-charge 'labor of love' by many fans. Among modders, however, increasing professionalization tendencies and commercial endeavors can be observed as well. Taking into account past and current efforts to commodify modding and in-depth interviews with modders of *Bethesda Softworks* games, this article explores different perspectives on modding and money and examines the strategies modders use to commercialize their derivative works and their fannish labor in general.

Keywords: Modding, Playbour, Commodification, Crowdfunding, Payment

1. INTRODUCTION

Whenever a new book becomes a hit with audiences, or a TV show gains its first followers, it usually doesn't take long for creative fans to take the source material into their own hands and transform it. In today's age of the internet, their productive practices have become a mass phenomenon and most 'fandoms' are easily accessible, allowing fans to interpret and discuss their favorite media together, as well as sharing their own works based on it. Video games, too, provide a point of departure for fan-works, and many commercial releases are accompanied by fan-created, non-official stories, artwork, or web videos. A fan practice unique to video games is 'modding': the act of altering and extending the content of existing video games with user-created, custom-produced content (Sihvonen 2011, 12). The resulting game modifications ('mods') come in all shapes and sizes, ranging from smaller, cosmetic alterations to fundamental overhauls of games. Modders design new outfits for in-game characters, tweak gameplay mechanics, fix bugs, and sometimes even convert the source material from scratch. As is the case with other fan practices, most modders share their creations online for free. It's not just other players who benefit from this, but also the video game industry itself: Mods can improve games (Behr 2010, 64), pro-long the time they are actively played and endorsed (Postigo 2007, 302), serve as free market investigation (Kücklich 2007), and reach previously neglected target groups without putting official publishers at risk. Because modders rarely get remunerated for their free, often value-enhancing la-bor, the suspicion that video game companies take advantage of their technologically skilled fans as unpaid 'hobbyist game developers' is not un-founded (Abend/Beil 2017, 307). Official publishers not only receive reve-nues generated through modding, but usually also possess all intellectual property rights of mods made with assets from their games, which means that they can modify, adapt, and even sell the user-created content (Postigo 2003, 600). In this context, the video game industry has been urged to recognize modding as a form of labor that produces capital for official publishers, grant modders more rights,

ownership of the content they create, and a monetary share of the value they enhance.[1]

Modding as a fan practice has been theorized as a voluntary "labor of love" (Kow/Nardi 2010), and it has been claimed that financial interests are hardly a motivation to create mods (Behr 2010, 67). Still, and perhaps surprisingly, commercialization efforts can be observed within modding communities, and modders have come up with innovative earning opportunities in relation to their practice. The following paper seeks to discuss the commodification of modding by extending the focus to monetization strategies modders themselves apply – often independent of official developers and right holders. After having taken into account different perspectives on the relationship between the video game industry and modders, such creator-initiated strategies and examples of 'paid modding' will be discussed based on selected examples and interviews with modders of the *Bethesda Softworks*' games THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM (2011) and FALLOUT 4 (2015).

2.   WHAT IS MODDING?

While most mods alter smaller, often cosmetic aspects of video games, experienced modders may also tinker with a game's code and its deeper structures. In some cases, modifying games even results in so-called 'total conversions': technically complex modifications that fundamentally change a game and have only little in common with the original product (Beil 2014, 213). One of the best-known total conversion mods is COUNTER-STRIKE, originally a modification of HALF-LIFE (1998). The mod, released by Minh Le and Jess Cliffe in 1999, added a complex, competitive multiplayer mode to HALF-LIFE, and drastically changed the game's scenario and gameplay mechanics. Because it was massively popular with the game's audience, developer *Valve* hired some of the creators in charge and released an official version of COUNTER-STRIKE for Windows in 2000.

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[1]   In 2005, Julian Kücklich coined the term "precarious playbour" to describe the hybrid form of play and work modders carry out in their free time. The video game industry often benefits from this free, value-enhancing labor, as will be discussed in detail later in this paper.

On a similar note, the currently very successful Battle Royale genre, as seen in games like FORTNITE (2017), was first developed and distributed through modding. Success stories like that of COUNTER-STRIKE show that mods can compete with, or even exceed, some of the official products the commercial game industry brings forth. However, taking a closer look at popular modding platforms and communities reveals that most mods are developed on a much smaller scale. More common are so-called 'core mods' or 'script mods.' Here, modders add their own lines of code to introduce game-changing features, to add depth to existing gameplay mechanics, or to remove them altogether to work in new, improved systems. Such mods that leave the character of the original program largely intact are summarized under the term 'partial conversions' (Beil 2014, 208). Smaller partial conversions change single aspects of a game by minimally editing existing lines of code. Mods are also developed to wipe out ingame bugs (software errors) that have not (yet) been fixed by the official game developers (Poor 2014, 1262). Finally, the vast majority of mods are cosmetic in nature – so-called 'skins' or 'overhauls' that contain new textures for the 3D objects of a game. These cosmetic mods are realized through image editing software and change the appearances and clothes of game characters or the virtual surroundings, among other things. Some game developers provide editors or software development kits to support and simplify the development of mods. *Bethesda*, for instance, provides the free editing tool *Creation Kit* that supports the creation of new worlds, game characters and weapons, and helps change in-game textures. Mods are usually available for free and shared through online modding communities where users can download them and engage with modders by commenting, requesting new content, or giving suggestions on already existing mods. Modders can utilize these platforms to receive recognition and feedback, and may also meet others with whom they can create new content (Abend/Beil 2017, 310). In addition to large, general distribution platforms like *NexusMods* or the *Steam Workshop*, mods are also shared on fan-websites that focus on particular games. Because consoles are equipped with strict security measurements and a closed infrastructure that prohibits third-party content, mods are usually solely developed for

PC games (Behr 2010, 6). On rare occasions, however, the console versions of games, such as Sᴋʏʀɪᴍ and Fᴀʟʟᴏᴜᴛ 4, permit a slimmed-down, 'subject to approval' form of modding. While PC mods can be found on external, non-official websites, such authorized console mods have to be downloaded through the in-game menu and are thus subject to a much stricter examination than PC mods. Beyond that, they are simpler in nature, often come with size limitations, and prohibit the use of external assets. With the modding scene being spread across numerous platforms and forums, the phenomenon of modding can hardly be quantified. However, taking a closer look at platforms like *NexusMods* makes it evident just how popular video game modding is among players: In February 2022, *NexusMods* hosts 358,574 files for 1,606 games, has 31,536,657 registered members and 5,545,042,547 mod downloads.

3.   PERSPECTIVES ON MODDING AND MONEY

Modding is usually considered a leisure activity practiced by hobbyists – and modders are not necessarily seen as professional game designers, but rather as "players and fans of the game" (Poor 2014, 1250). Since most modders have a strong connection and fannish relationship to the games they work with, their practices have often been analyzed through the theoretical lens of media fan studies. On the Internet, large distribution platforms like the aforementioned *NexusMods* or *Steam Workshop* as well as self-organized online communities allow video game fans to come together and participate in the "collective production, debate, and circulation of meanings, interpretations, and fantasies in response to various artifacts of contemporary popular culture" (Jenkins 2006a, 137). Similar to fans that creatively engage with media products such as books, films, or television series, video game modders can be described as "textual poachers": fans that create their own meanings and fill in the gaps with individual, perhaps even oppositional interpretations when going through media texts (Jenkins 1992). As textual poachers, modders elaborate on select elements of video games – whether it is the gameplay, the story, or cosmetic aspects – and make these games 'their own' by changing and

expanding them. In this context, modding can be compared to other fan practices, like fanfiction or fanart, with the particularity that certain technical knowledge and software is needed for the creation of most mods, and that mods don't exist separately from the official source material they are based on, but have to be installed *into* a commercial game to work.

In recent decades, the research interest of media fan studies has increasingly shifted to digital spaces. Because of their long-established practices of creating, sharing, and discussing their works digitally, fans are often considered early adopters of digital technologies (Jenkins 2006a, 138). Henry Jenkins discusses the shift in media culture towards digital spheres and the rise of active and productive forms of media consumption under the term "participatory culture" (ibid.) Another term that illustrates the blurring lines between media production and media usage is provided by Axel Bruns (2010, 195): "Produsage" comprises the creation of shared content in a participatory environment, collaborative processes, and new forms of distribution. As a participatory practice, it allows users to become "produsers" that engage with media productively and join forces online to continuously create new content. Interestingly, both produsage and participatory culture don't seem to be built upon monetary incentives. Instead, communal recognition and the ideal of a non-commercial culture of creation appear to be their driving factors (Reißmann et al. 2017, 161). In fan studies, too, it has been found that fan labor most often is not associated with profit because fan work is usually made available free of charge on the Internet. Fan communities are thus described as gift economies based on sharing and bartering (Postigo 2003; Jenkins 2006b; Hellekson 2009). While these communities are not based on money, their foundation is not necessarily generosity, however. Instead of monetary rewards, immaterial reciprocations (e.g., attention, recognition) are often expected and exchanged here (Anderson 2010, 152). The status that hobbyist fan laborers gain within their communities can be one of the motivations to create and share mods – and for many, recognition and appreciation are enough (Behr 2010, 63). It would therefore be presumptuous to assume that money is the only form of compensation productive fans receive and care about (Postigo 2003, 604). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the

'free of charge mentality' associated with fan culture does not necessarily apply to all productive fans, and that monetary interests *can* be an incentive to contribute – or at least a welcome opportunity. As John A. L. Banks (2003, 10) already pointed out in the early 2000s, this is not a new development, either: "The fans are fraternising with the enemy or even going commercial themselves, what is to be done!"

Interestingly, this idea of 'fraternizing with the enemy' – in other words, productive fans cooperating with official media producers – is often highlighted when discussing modding practices. Take, for instance, THE SIMS: Shortly after its release in 2000, the game had not only attracted a large online fan community, but also a considerable number of content creators who eagerly transformed the life simulation by introducing new styles of furniture to the virtual living room, developing celebrity look-alike skins, or coming up with innovative gameplay mechanics. Developer *Maxis* not only tolerated the modded game content, but in fact entered into dialog with the productive SIMS fans and recognized mods as an important contribution to their own product (Jenkins 2006b, 162-167). The creators of THE SIMS had developed an early awareness of the fact that modders' innovative ideas can contribute to the success of a game. As a result, the company's terms and conditions were adjusted and subsequently permitted prolific SIMS fans to earn minor revenue to cover costs associated with distributing their fannish activities and products, e.g., web hosting (ibid., 167). Soon, the first 'mod subscriptions' emerged. Here, users do not buy individual modifications, but pay for monthly or unlimited access to the restricted download area of a website. Part of the reason for this 'pay-to-use' approach was the traffic that popular SIMS modding websites were overcome with. Modding websites on free servers were often down because of high traffic volume, and webmasters had no choice but to pay for more bandwidth if they wanted their content to be seen. So-called SIMS 'paysites' still exist to this day, with *Newsea Sims* offering monthly memberships (and with it access to all of their SIMS mods) for $9,50, and a 12-month subscription for $70, for example. Other paid modding sites have switched strategies over the years. *The Sims Resource*, launched as the first SIMS fansite in 1999 and once the biggest paysite in

the SIMS universe, now states on its website: "We offer more custom content than any other site and it's all for free!" (The Sims Resource 2022). However, users may subscribe to an optional VIP membership and pay between $3 and $12 per month, depending on the total length of the subscription and its auto-renewal (a 12-month subscription will cost $3 per month, a 6-month subscription $3,67 per month, a one-time payment for 4 weeks $12, etc.). VIP users get exclusive perks, such as no advertisements on the website, early access to custom content two weeks before it is available to free users, and several features that make browsing, downloading and installing mods more pleasant. Besides optional VIP memberships, some SIMS websites also accept voluntary donations to cover their costs and sell advertising space on their websites. While any commercial use of the SIMS software technically violates developer *Maxis'* and publisher *Electronic Arts'* end-user license agreements (EULA), both rarely take action against it. In fact, in 2009, a *Maxis* spokesperson defended the practice:

> "We are proud that so many of THE SIMS and THE SIMS 2 players create their own art for the games and share it with others. Sharing art online is a hobby that involves an investment of time, energy and money. Whether players choose to share their original artistic creations with the community is up to them: some custom content creators design work for a fee; some host their works on sites that organize, store and serve an enormous amount of content for subscribers; some artists request donations; and some artists allow all players to download their creations for free. These artists set their own terms for how they want to share their talents with the community at large. Those terms should be respected by other players."
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> (MaxoidDrea, BeyondSims 2009)

In 2017, this laissez-faire policy was officially rebutted when *EA* employee SimGuruDrake explained: "Creators cannot lock content they make using our game behind a paywall. While we do not police this content (there is no way we would create a team simply to monitor this) we do take reports sent to us seriously and [act] accordingly" (SimsVIP 2018). Interestingly, the same statement made clear that paid content as an incentive is permitted. This means that modders can offer such content as long as it is made available for free after three weeks. While workarounds like VIP

memberships and voluntary donations for modding websites do not necessarily interfere with *Electronic Arts*' EULA, even paysites that constantly lock content behind paywalls are not being prosecuted and there have been no legal cases as of yet. Players are encouraged to report policy infringements, but the online form they are referred to does not cover paid mods, which suggests that while *Electronic Arts* does not support such paid content, perhaps it is not a top priority when it comes to enforcing the company's terms of service. Lastly, it is also worth considering that not all modding content for THE SIMS necessarily is an intellectual property rights violation because certain cosmetic game assets, like original meshes (and not, e.g., recolors of the official in-game items) can be created *for* the game without using actual content *from* the game.

More so than in other gaming communities, paid modding has always been a topic of interest within the SIMS community and has been utilized both by content creators who sell and players who buy mods. At the same time, paysites and all means to generate income through mods have been critically discussed and often rejected by SIMS fans in the past. As John Fiske notes, commercial interest can actually appear as an affront within fan communities: "[T]here is a strong distrust of making a profit in fandom, and those who attempt to do so are typically classed as hucksters rather than fans" (Fiske 1992, 40). Up to this day, *Electronic Arts* is often prompted by players themselves to take action against mod sellers, and websites with paid content are repeatedly reported in the official forums. Taking up this debate, modder J. M. Pescado founded paysites.mustbe-destroyed.org in 2006, a website that hosts 'pirated' content from several paysites, making it available for free. Pescado's project is still active and also covers the most recent installment of the series, THE SIMS 4. In February 2022, paid content from over 200 *Sims 4* creators is offered here free of charge, with the front page prominently citing *Electronic Arts*' EULA.

THE SIMS and the way modding is responded to by its official producers – from clear endorsement and appreciation in the early 2000s to a laissez-faire approach in the late 2010s – sheds light on the volatile relationship of modders and official publishers. American developer, pub-

lisher, and digital distribution company *Valve Corporation* supports modding through the distribution platform *Steam Workshop* that allows users to share their custom content with others. Successful mods have the chance of being bought by *Valve* – and particularly competent modders may get the opportunity to join the games industry, as the case of COUNTER-STRIKE's developers being hired by *Valve* illustrates. In 2021, Polish developer and publisher *CD Projekt Red* hired the creators of fan favorite mod "WolvenKit," with the modders' own studio Yigsoft becoming part of the company while staying operationally separate. In an interview with *Kotaku*, a *CD Projekt Red* representative explains: "The modding community has always been very important to us and we are happy to be working with them side by side on further expanding the tools which are available to modders" (Notis 2021). That same year, *Bethesda* hired Stephanie Zachariadis, head writer of the DLC-sized "Fallout: London" mod, as an associate quest designer (Bevan 2021). Video game companies have come up with various approaches to support modding in the past. A notable example is *Epic Games'* and *Nvidia*'s "$1,000,000 Nvidia Make Something Unreal Contest" in 2004 that comprised high cash prizes and an Unreal Engine 3 license (Sotamaa 2005, 6). In 2016, *Nvidia* and *Bethesda* launched the "FALLOUT 4 Mod Contest" that honored exceptionally talented modders. The winner received $10,000, a unique, FALLOUT-themed PC, and engineering support from *Nvidia* (Bethesda 2016). In fan studies, this endorsement of the modding scene has been discussed by Henry Jenkins, who brings up COUNTER-STRIKE's acquisition by *Valve* and developer *BioWare* including fan-made mods in the official expansion packs of NEVERWINTER NIGHTS (2002) as unique examples of official media producers cooperating with productive fans (and vice versa). Jenkins (2006b, 164) points out that compared to other fan cultures, "the modding community may be unique in having amateur-produced works taken up directly by commercial companies for distribution." However, such instances of paid cooperation are rare, and modders usually don't get a share of the financial success of games despite contributing to their value (Postigo 2003, 597; Abend/Beil 2017, 307). The phenomenon of modding being utilized as value-enhancing, free labor by the industry has been

critically discussed as "precarious playbour," a term coined by Julian Kück-lich (2005), who notes that "modders' leisure is being commodified by the games industry." As mods can only be used *with* and *in* the games they are based on, they don't transform the original products figuratively, but actively, by adding new content, tinkering with gameplay mechanics, and eliminating bugs. Again, official developers and publishers can profit from this type of free, skilled labor their userbase carries out, despite usually not directly generating revenue through mods (Postigo 2003, 596). Modding calls attention to current trends and players' preferences – and themes, genres, and gameplay mechanics first tried out through mods have been adapted by official publishers in the past. In that way, as Kücklich (2005) puts it, modding can "inject a shot of much-needed innovation into an industry seemingly unable to afford taking commercial risks." By constantly adding new dimensions to games, modders contribute to keeping them interesting and up-to-date (Postigo 2003, 596). Modding can even extend a game's shelf-life, as games like THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM demonstrate: First released in 2011, SKYRIM still has an active playerbase in 2022 – largely thanks to modders that have modernized the game by enhancing its gameplay and its textures, giving players a reason to still play SKYRIM or pick it up for the first time over a decade after its release. Against this background, it is not surprising that modding is not only tolerated, but actively supported by some game companies. Most player communities are well aware of the industry's seeming reliance on modders as non-official (but much needed), unwaged hobbyist game developers, and the video game industry is in turn often accused of having a 'mods will fix it' mentality. "Yet for some stupid reason we all accept this," a user on *Reddit* writes when discussing 'broken games' (games with numerous bugs or serious gameplay flaws), "because [there is a] legion of hardworking, unpaid modders to clean up the mess."[2] Such observations have also been picked up by the media, with two rather bumpy game re-

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2   https://www.reddit.com/r/fo4/comments/3z3eye/im_get-ting_sick_of_mods_will_fix_it_because/ [Accessed May 21, 2022].

leases in 2020 and 2021 being accompanied by headlines like "Cyber-punk 2077: Modders Fix The Entire Game" (Singh 2021), and "GTA Trilogy Modders Are Already Working to Fix the Game" (Coulson 2021).

Even in the rare cases that companies directly pay modders for their work or pay them shares when mods are getting monetized, the suspicion of precarious labor is perhaps not unfounded, and publishers have been called out for this in the past. In 2015, *Valve* and *Bethesda* introduced their concept of 'paid mods' to the *Steam Workshop*. The short-lived, optional feature allowed users to offer their mods for sale at a fixed rate or as a 'pay-what-you-want' proposal. The earnings were then split amongst *Valve*, *Bethesda*, and the respective creator, with the latter earning 25% of the revenue. This introduction of paid mods caused great backlash among both modders and players, and resulted in an influx of complaints, petitions and protest, some of it actually through modding: After user amus-quiz had uploaded a digital protest sign with slogans like "Free the Mods" and "No Paid Mods" for the characters of SKYRIM to hold up (see Fig. 1), it briefly became the most popular mod on *Steam Workshop*.

Fig. 1: SKYRIM mod "Protest sign: No paying for mods".
(Source: https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=431467621, Accessed May 21, 2022)

While most mod-users and modders agreed that *Valve*'s and *Bethesda*'s perspectives on paid modding were flawed, their arguments were diverse. Some users denounced paid modding in general, referring to the idea of modding as a voluntary, unconditional labor of love, and accusing supporters of paid modding of being "sellouts" (Gain 2015). Others criticized the small revenue of only 25% that modders were supposed to receive despite 'doing all the work.' However, it was not just the companies' payout policy that faced criticism: Modders, too, were accused of shady business practices in light of offering minor cosmetic changes with a price tag of up to $5. Plagiarism turned out to be an issue as well as, here and there, users took external content from free distribution platforms like *Nexus-Mods* and re-uploaded it to the *Steam Workshop* as paid content without the actual creators' consent. Beyond that, it was pointed out that many mods on *Steam Workshop* draw on third-party content that neither *Valve* nor *Bethesda* own the rights for – and that selling such content could fall under copyright infringement. Lastly, users were apprehensive of a growing centralization and surveillance of modding, as all paid content was supposed to be approved by *Steam*. Less than a week after the launch of the paid mods functionality on *Steam Workshop*, the feature was removed and buyers were refunded, with a *Valve* representative explaining:

> "[W]e underestimated the differences between our previously successful revenue sharing models, and the addition of paid mods to SKYRIM's workshop. We understand our own game's communities pretty well, but stepping into an established, years old modding community in SKYRIM was probably not the right place to start iterating. We think this made us miss the mark pretty badly, even though we believe there's a useful feature somewhere here."

(Johnson 2015)

Two years after the paid mods controversy, *Bethesda* launched its *Creation Club* in 2017. The *Creation Club* contains a curated collection of new in-game content (weapons, apparel, decorations, characters, gameplay, etc.) made by fans. Different from paid mods on *Steam Workshop*, this content exists separately from other mods and is not part of an otherwise free platform, but is exclusively distributed through FALLOUT 4 and SKYRIM

where it is published as official content and can be bought on digital marketplaces. Modders interested in the *Creation Club* cannot simply upload their content for sale, but have to apply and pitch their ideas to become part of the project. While applications are open to everyone, it can be assumed that experienced, skilled modders are preferred as the *Creation Club* aims to publish premium content. If selected as official creators, participants will be paid throughout development of their commissioned work, although the amount of payment is not publicly known. The selected mods run through a development pipeline and are fully localized so that compatibility with the original games can be ensured (Bethesda 2017). Once released, modders do not get a revenue share of their published content. In that sense, the *Creation Club* may be compared to outsourcing the creation of smaller downloadable content (DLC) to third party contractors. Perhaps addressing the 2015 controversy, *Bethesda* makes it very clear on their website that working with the *Creation Club* is not the same as paid mods, that all content promoted through the club is original, and that mods in general will remain a free system:

> "We've looked at many ways to do 'paid mods', and the problems outweigh the benefits. [...] But, there's a constant demand from our fans to add more official high-quality content to our games, and [...] we think many in our community have the talent to work directly with us and create some amazing new things."
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> (ibid.)

Just like paid mods on the *Steam Workshop, Bethesda*'s *Creation Club* has caused some controversy since its launch due to being a microtransaction marketplace, its pricing policy, and the (so far unfounded) fear that free distribution platforms could be affected. At the same time, it has been praised as being a mutually beneficial project that allows modders to work with and learn from professional game developers and have their work promoted in the official games.

4. FROM PRECARIOUS PLAYBOR TO REIMBURSED LABOR OF LOVE: MONETIZING FANNISH LABOR IN THE *BE-THESDA* MODDING COMMUNITY

How do modders feel about 'paid modding'? Can they imagine selling their content, and if so, under which circumstances? What do they think of companies that try to commodify modding? And beyond directly selling mods, which strategies are used to reward modders financially? These and other questions were discussed during 12 in-depth interviews with female modders in 2019 and 2021.[3] The interviews, in which the participating modders discussed their practices, motivations and ambitions in relation to modding, were part of a larger netnographic examination of the *Bethesda Softworks* online modding scene with a focus on the action role-playing games THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM and FALLOUT 4. The interviewed modders are between 20 and 55 years old, live in Europe and the US, and have different levels of experience; one interviewee was new to modding, while another participant had already started creating mods in the 1980s.

As discussed above, *Bethesda* has come up with different ways of endorsing, supporting and monetizing modding in the past. Some of them caused backlash, as the 'paid mods controversy' on *Steam Workshop* in 2015 illustrates. At the same time, *Bethesda*'s benevolent stance on modding and their support of it through free tools and promotion is often positively highlighted. One modder notes: "*Bethesda* so far has been in a league of their own in terms of modding support." Another modder adds: "I guess *Bethesda* is happy that we're keeping their game alive and thus increase their bottom line, and we are happy to get official tools when most publishers would never even think of releasing them to the public." There is a general openness among modders to cooperate with official developers. Modders with ambitions to join the games industry are particularly interested in this kind of collaboration and describe their relation-

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3   Below, selected quotes from the interviews will be shared. All participants have been fully anonymized.

ship to *Bethesda* as mutually beneficial: "Some people paint it as something parasitic, that Bethesda feeds off the modding community, but for myself I see it as mutualism. We all benefit from the relationship – modders, *Bethesda*, and mod users."

For most interviewees, immaterial rewards like recognition and appreciation are more important than financial benefits. In order to obtain this, various strategies of self-marketing are deployed. This includes advertising on social media, video trailers for upcoming mod projects, and elaborately designed websites in addition to profiles on modding platforms. While this desire to 'be seen' and recognition as an immaterial currency within the modding gift culture are widely accepted, the introduction of actual money and monetization strategies to modding communities seems to be controversial. Some interviewed modders argue that the practice should be a free-of-charge endeavor and a labor of love – and that the introduction of paid models can actually harm the modding community and threaten modders' independence. In the interviews, it is often noted that players have high expectations of modders already, and that this could become worse if they were to be paid:

> "I hate it when people comment in a fashion that gives me the feeling that they think I work for them and that I *have* to implement their requests/suggestions, etc. I consider suggestions when presented politely, but I am not sure why some users think they can tell me how to code my mod. Last time I checked they were not paying me a salary!"

It is also assumed by some that user-created content becomes worse in quality as soon as money is involved, as earnings then seem to become more important to creators than passion and creativity. A critical modder explains: "Mods were made with love and care. Mods made for money are just to make a fast buck. Money corrupts and destroys modding. It should remain free, a labor of love and pride in a job well done." One participant points out that corporate interference can drive apart the community, and that projects like the *Creation Club*, where selected modders are hired by *Bethesda* to create content for sale in a professional, secluded environment, take away modders from an otherwise non-commercial gift culture:

"I feel it has divided the modding community and caused a lot of great modders to [...] go to *Bethesda* in hopes of earning more money. I really hate what *Bethesda* has done with their *Creation Club*, which has taken wonderful free (or donation only) modders out of the free modding community and instead they are now just making paid mods."

While all interviewed modders are aware of the controversy surrounding paid mods and some of them are highly critical of the topic themselves, there are also some advocates among the participants ("Wouldn't it be nice if I could just keep doing what I love (making mods/games) and get paid for it? Yeah. Yeah, it would"). It is often mentioned that content creators deserve compensation for their work. "I think that it should be done in a way that respects the users, the modders and the game company," one modder explains, "However, far too often, each of the three groups only cares about their own profits." Another modder claims that players often solely protest against paid modding for their own advantage:

"People burned *Bethesda* to the ground paying the authors by purchasing the rights to what they created. Then selling those mods as DLC. '*Bethesda* is making money from the authors! They're being used!' The truth is, the end users didn't want to reach in their pockets for the mods people work on."

Most interview participants have paid for mods before or can imagine paying for particularly elaborate mods that require a lot of work ("I would gladly spend money on mods that expand games or add new maps"). The direct sale of their own work does not seem to be an option for most interviewees, however. Interestingly, this seems to be less of an expression of modesty, but is often connected to a perceived lack of skill: "I mostly create smaller, cosmetic mods. I don't think that anyone would pay for that." The answers are quite different when experienced, so-called 'veteran modders' are asked about financial rewards. Particularly adept modders are more in favor of paid services and financial remunerations. They do not necessarily see their practice as a mere hobby, but as "serious leisure" (Stebbins 1992, 2) that deserves to be rewarded. When discussing this, an expert modder who has written and coded several DLC-sized mods compares modding to a job that requires professional skills and is quite time-consuming. Besides creating and maintaining the actual mod,

her free labor also includes providing modding tutorials and commented source code for other modders to study and learn from. She says:

> "I think that modders have every right to expect some compensa-tion for their work. There are those saying 'modding is meant to be free!' and mean 'I want you to give me free stuff!' Modding is soft-ware development, and at the level some of us are doing it, it re-quires both professional skills and serious time commitment. In other words, it's a job. I do believe that users financially supporting modders will result in more and better-quality mods. Which is a win/win situation for everyone."

Selling mods that use copyrighted assets from commercial games inter-feres with most publishers' end-user license agreements. *Bethesda*, too, prohibits the direct sale of mods based on their commercial assets. Be-cause of this, legal workarounds to generate revenue enjoy great popular-ity among modders. Through 'donations,' users can financially support content creators for their labor in general and express their gratitude with-out buying individual items. Modders that accept donation often claim that even small contributions help them to remain motivated. Because modding is usually carried out during the creators' free time, donations can result in a gain in time to spend with the hobby. In this context, one modder explains that she does not have to take another part-time job thanks to her donors – and that she can use the saved time for modding. Most modders interested in donations have their own profiles on crowd-funding platform *Patreon*. *Patreon* can not only be used as a digital tip jar for content creators, but also has a subscription system that lets 'Patrons' pay a monthly amount to the owner of a *Patreon* profile. Subscriptions can be cancelled each month and usually come in various 'tiers' with dif-ferent rewards. While the $1 tier is often used as a non-committal tip, one interviewed modder for instance offers rewards for monthly donations of $5, granting subscribers access to additional content for her most popular mod, twenty-four-seven technical support, and an invite to her commu-nity server on *Discord*. In addition to these perks, users that pay $30 per month can request merchandise and exclusive commissioned work. Such commissions for individual users are slowly becoming more popular within the modding scene and offer yet another way of generating income

through the hobbyist practice. Another modder provides personalized shout-outs in her mods to everyone who buys the $25 tier. The interviewed modders that use *Patreon* make between $200 and $550 per month on the platform. One modder has stated on her *Patreon* profile that her goal is to earn $1500 per month, and she explains that this could eventually work out as other, particularly prolific modders generate even higher amounts. To give an example: "Basemental" modder Filip created a series of adult mods for THE SIMS 4. In February 2022, his *Patreon* profile has over 6,600 members, with the lowest monthly membership costing $4,75 (Basemental 2022). Although such cases are rare, it is worth noting that even smaller modders can earn a little extra money through platforms like *Patreon* if they have devoted followers. It is important to the respondents that donations are voluntary and that mods are not (permanently) hidden behind a paywall. When browsing *Patreon*, the picture is mixed: While some modders create exclusive content that only donators receive, others make such content available for everyone after a few weeks. Many modders also keep their mods free, and use *Patreon* to receive tips without offering any rewards or paid mods.

All interviewed modders share their content on the distribution platform *NexusMods*. In 2018, *NexusMods* introduced the reward system 'Donation Points' which works as follows: Parts of the revenue from advertisements and premium memberships on *Nexus Mods* flow into a donation pool every month. In addition, *Nexus Mods* has its own *Patreon* profile ("Mod Author Donation Fund"), where users can donate $1 once-only or monthly. Modders may register their content for the Donation Points program to receive points for each unique download of their content, with 1000 Donation Points equaling $1. Received points can also be split among up to 24 users who worked on the same mod. At the end of every month, Donation Points are proportionately disbursed to the participating modders, depending on the amount of money in the pool and the total number of participating modders, unique downloads, and total downloads. Earned Donation points can be redeemed for cash, used in the *NexusMods* store to buy a premium membership or selected games, or be donated to charity. In May 2022, a total of $2,048,764.50 has been paid out

through Donation Points since the program's launch in May 2018 (Nexus-Mods 2022). Over 50% of the Donation Points on *NexusMods* are generated through mods created for SKYRIM and its Special Edition (see Fig. 2).
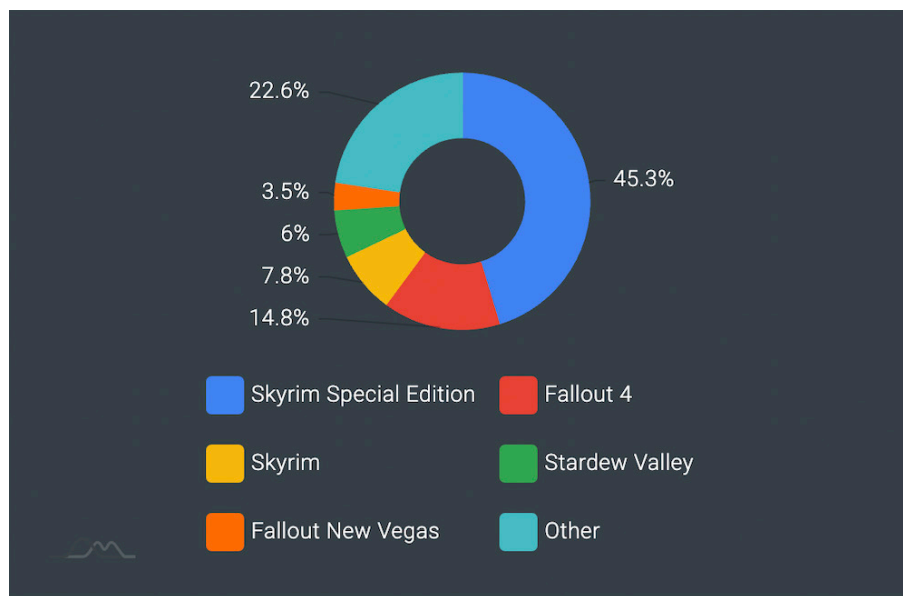
Fig. 2: All time Donation Points distribution on *NexusMods*, sorted by game. (Source: https://www.nexusmods.com/about/donation-points/, Accessed May 21, 2022)

While the Donation Points system is generally approved by modders, it is also critically pointed out in the interviews that *NexusMods*, despite not being a video game publisher, is a commercial player and more a part of the video game industry than of fan culture:

> "These websites have always been for profit [...] and generated massive incomes for their private owners. We are making money for other people. We're 'provided' hosting, and forums to address user comments, but for what reason – was my thought. Why do we launch or host our work for other people to be paid huge sums for the Internet traffic? It doesn't help me with my hobby. It doesn't provide me any tools at all to ease the 1000s of hours I pour into my developments."

While the direct sale of mods seems to be a taboo within the *Bethesda* community (as one modder puts it: "Paysites is a dirty word!"), workarounds like *Patreon* or *NexusMods*' Donation Points are supported by most

modders. Interestingly enough, one modder explains that "money just corrupts everything it touches, and the mod scene was so pure before paid modding became popular," but, at the same time, uses the *NexusMods* program as a perceived morally acceptable alternative. Like others, she argues that these solutions are based on voluntariness, with the uploaded modding content still being available free-of-charge for users.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has presented several instances of paid modding and donation systems in relation to the practice, initiated by both the video game industry and non-official creators from the modding scene. Beyond that, *Bethesda* modders' perspectives on paid modding and payment workarounds were discussed. Proceeding from this, it can be noted that under certain circumstances, financial interests can be a motivation for modders to contribute. For most modders in this context it is important that financial compensation is voluntarily and that content is not permanently hidden behind paywalls, so that non-paying users have no disadvantage. Similar to other fan communities, the direct selling of otherwise free fanworks is mostly seen critically, with one exception: Experienced modders that spend a lot of their free time on large projects, performing unpaid labor, can imagine being paid by users – and in some cases, this is already happening, with users agreeing that such profound work should be financially rewarded. There have also been cases where the games industry itself tried to monetize modding, some of them controversial, and others more accepted. In the discussed instances of official cooperation, all intellectual property rights of modded content remain with the official companies. Modders are either paid a small share of the revenue or are paid one-time only to do commissioned work for official publishers, thus not benefiting from potential revenue at all. Because of this, it could be argued that most official monetization strategies, despite being seemingly supportive of modding, are merely another form of precarious labor, perhaps in a somewhat more appealing design. Paid modding has always been a

very controversial topic within the modding community – and when facing such strong opposition and perspectives that legitimately theorize modding as precarious labor, it is easy to overlook that financial incentives can play a role in modding, and that modders have found innovative ways to bypass these precarious conditions by coming up with monetization strategies independent of the games industry. This form of emancipation from official producers and modders taking matters into their own hands should not be disregarded when discussing modding both as precarious labor and a labor of love – and perhaps it can serve as a reference point when examining other fan practices in the context of paid services.

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